

# Honoring two local comedy legends

**BYLINE:** andrew  
mcginn  
commentary  
**DATE:** May 4,  
2006

**PUBLICATION:**  
Springfield News-Sun  
(OH)

**SECTION:**  
B  
**PAGE:** 1

Besides being prone to growling while hunched over - typically when provoked by a female of his species - Bobby Clark represented the fully evolved 20th century comedian. The Springfield native got his start in turn-of-the-century minstrel shows, then migrated onto the circus, vaudeville, burlesque, musical theater, silent films and talkies.

And by 1951, Clark's evolution was complete when he stepped out as guest host of "Michael Todd's Revue," part of NBC's "Colgate Comedy Hour."

He made it to television.

But his survival would have made even Darwin sit up and take notice.

Clark's career could have collapsed 15 years before with the grisly suicide of his partner, Paul McCullough.

Both from Springfield, Clark and McCullough were stars of stage and screen in the '20s and '30s - and we're talking huge stars, too.

By the time they hit the 30 year-mark, they were believed to have been together longer than any other comedy team.

And while Clark proved he was fit enough to go it alone, you can't tangle with your destiny - today, hardly anybody remembers him, or the painted-on set of eyeglasses that became his trademark.

George Willeman, the Springfielder who oversees the Library of Congress film vault at Wright-Patterson Air Force Base, will try to right that wrong tonight at the **Heritage Center** as part of the museum's Creative Muses series.

The series has been exploring the cultural side of Clark County's past.

Willeman, who quite possibly knows everything there is to know about old movies, will present an appreciation of Clark and McCullough at 7 p.m. Admission is free.

Best of all, he'll showcase one of the duo's 21 shorts for RKO, 1933's "The Gay Nighties."

He also plans to show a segment from Clark's foray into live TV.

And then you'll be able to decide for yourself if Clark and McCullough have been unjustly forgotten.

"The biggest difficulty with Clark and McCullough's humor is that it is from a much different era," Willeman confessed. "It is of a certain school of vaudeville and burlesque.

"Maybe too complex for some people today. You don't see much in the way of intellectual comedy."

Their popularity at one time, however, is without question.

In 1926, they became Broadway headliners, starring in Bert Kalmar and Harry Ruby's "The Ramblers."

The duo also starred in 1930's "Strike Up the Band" - a war satire by the team of George and Ira Gershwin, George S. Kaufman and Morrie Ryskind.

When they made their film debut, in W.C. Fields' silent "Two Flaming Youths" in 1927, they did so as themselves, suggesting everybody knew who they were.

So when the 52-year-old McCullough killed himself, by grabbing a barber's razor and slashing his own throat, wrists and arms in 1936, it was as shocking as they came.

In an undated Q&A with Broadway columnist Louis Sobol, Clark reminisced about the team's rise to fame:

"Suddenly, we were news," he said. "Neither McCullough nor myself ever quite understood. Once of the circus, always the circus.

"At times I had myself believing it was a dream."

It might as well have been.

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